National Endowment for the Arts

THE BIG READ

TEACHER'S GUIDE

JOHN STEINBECK'S

The Grapes of Wrath

INSTITUTE of Museum and Library SERVICES

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FOR THE ARTS

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NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS

The National Endowment for the Arts is a public agency dedicated to supporting excellence in the arts—both new and established—bringing the arts to all Americans, and providing leadership in arts education. Established by Congress in 1965 as an independent agency of the federal government, the Endowment is the nation's largest annual funder of the arts, bringing great art to all 50 states, including rural areas, inner cities, and military bases.

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The Institute of Museum and Library Services is the primary source of federal support for the nation's 122,000 libraries and 17,500 museums. The Institute's mission is to create strong libraries and museums that connect people to information and ideas. The Institute works at the national level and in coordination with state and local organizations to sustain heritage, culture, and knowledge; enhance learning and innovation; and support professional development.

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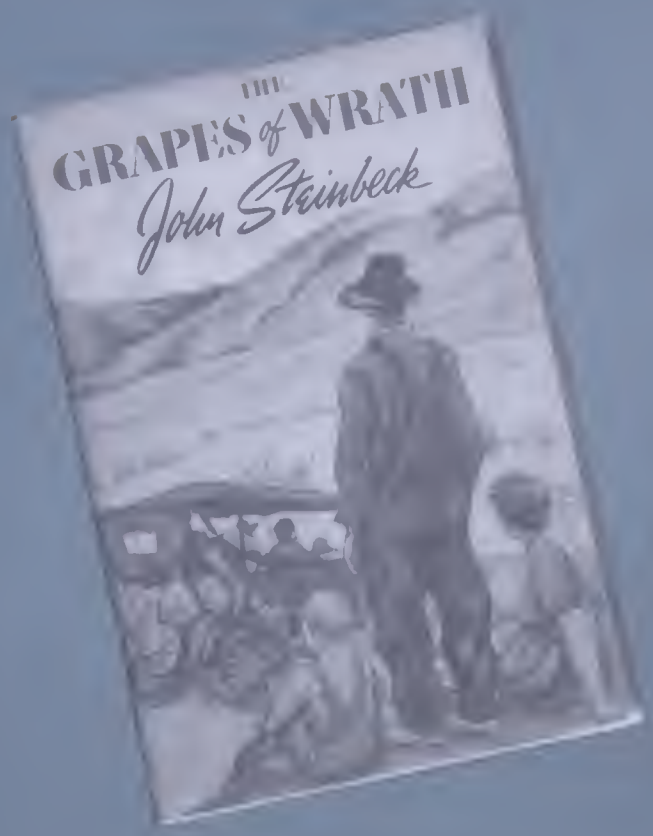

"In the souls of the people the grapes of wrath are filling and growing heavy, growing heavy for the vintage."

—from *The Grapes of Wrath*

Introduction

Photo by Vance Jacobs

Welcome to the Big Read, a major initiative from the National Endowment for the Arts. Designed to revitalize the role of literary reading in American culture, the Big Read hopes to unite communities through great literature, as well as inspire students to become life-long readers.

This Big Read Teacher's Guide contains ten lessons to lead you through John Steinbeck's classic novel, *The Grapes of Wrath.* Each lesson has four sections: a focus topic, discussion activities, writing exercises, and homework assignments. In addition, we have provided capstone projects and suggested essay topics, as well as handouts with more background information about the novel, the historical period, and the author. All lessons dovetail with the state language arts standards required in the fiction genre.

The Big Read teaching materials also include a CD. Packed with interviews, commentaries, and excerpts from the novel, the Big Read CD presents first-hand accounts of why Steinbeck's novel remains so compelling seven decades after its initial publication. Some of America's most celebrated writers, scholars, and actors have volunteered their time to make these Big Read CDs exciting additions to the classroom.

Finally, the Big Read Reader's Guide deepens your exploration with interviews, booklists, time lines, and historical information. We hope this guide and syllabus allow you to have fun with your students while introducing them to the work of a great American author.

From the NEA, we wish you an exciting and productive school year.

Dana Gioia
Chairman, National Endowment for the Arts

Suggested Teaching Schedule

1

Day One

FOCUS: Biography

Activities: Listen to the Big Read CD. Read Reader's Guide (pp. 3-7; 10-11). Write about an important, view-changing book.

Homework: Chapters 1-5 (pp. 1-39).*

2

Day Two

FOCUS: Culture and History

Activities: Go to *www.neajazzintheschools.org*. Write an essay how artists are influenced by politics.

Homework: Reader's Guide essay, (pp. 14-15). Chapters 6-9 (pp. 40-89).

3

Day Three

FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

Activities: Explore Steinbeck's use of parallel narration. Tell story from the the point of view of one of the characters.

Homework: Chapters 10-13 (pp. 90-149).

4

Day Four

FOCUS: Characters

Activities: Explore the antagonist. Write about how myths inform characters.

Homework: Chapters 14-17 (pp. 150-200).

5

Day Five

FOCUS: Figurative Language

Activities: Document figurative language in assigned chapters. Use metaphors in personal description of a road journey.

Homework: Chapters 18-19 (pp. 201-239).

*Page numbers refer to the Viking Penguin 2006 edition of *The Grapes of Wrath*

6

Day Six

FOCUS: Symbols

Activities: Analyze three major symbols: the road, the West, and the grapes of wrath.

Homework: Chapters 20-21 (pp. 240-284).

7

Day Seven

FOCUS: Character Development

Activities: Map the transformation of individual Joads and the family as a whole.

Homework: Chapters 22-24 (pp. 285-345).

8

Day Eight

FOCUS: The Plot Unfolds

Activities: Chart a time line of the novel. Invent an alternative ending. Read Reader's Guide (pp. 12-13).

Homework: Chapters 25-26 (pp. 346-405).

9

Day Nine

FOCUS: Themes of the Novel

Activities: Develop an interpretation based on a theme: the individual against the corporation, the American dream, redemption.

Homework: Chapters 27-28 (pp. 406-455).

10

Day Ten

FOCUS: What Makes a Great Book?

Activities: Explore the qualities of a great novel and the voice of a generation. Examine qualities that make Steinbeck's novel successful. Have students review each other's paper outlines or drafts.

Homework: Finish essays.

Lesson One

FOCUS: Biography

The author's life can inform and expand the reader's understanding of a novel. John Steinbeck reported on the Depression-era migrant workers of his native California for various newspapers and journals. A chronicler of the poor and dispossessed, he was a frequent visitor to migrant encampments, an experience that compelled him to write *The Grapes of Wrath*—the novel for which he won the 1940 Pulitzer Prize and is best remembered today. One practice of examining a literary work, biographical criticism, looks through the lens of an author's experience. In this lesson, explore the author's life to understand more fully the novel.

Discussion Activities

Listen to the Big Read CD. Students should take notes as they listen. Ask them to present the three most important points they learned from the CD. To go more in depth, you might focus on the reflections of one particular commentator. How does his or her background shape his or her reading of the novel?

Have students read the following essays from the Readers Guide: "Introduction to the Novel," "John Steinbeck (1902-1968)," and "Steinbeck and His Other Works" (pp. 3-7; 10-11). Divide the class into groups. Each group will present a summary of the points in its assigned essay. Ask students to add a creative twist to make their presentations memorable.

Writing Exercise

Have students write a one-page response to a book that taught them something about a group to which they do not belong. If the book changed the way they see a certain group—a race, a religion, a social class, a subculture—have them discuss at least three ways they were changed. Have them exchange their writing with a classmate and present their books, ideas, and conclusions to the class. Get them thinking about how a novel might adjust their views.

Homework

Read Chapters 1-5 (pp. 1-39). Ask students to think about how the Oklahoma landscape shapes the lives of the people who live in it. How does their own landscape shape the students' lives? When did their parents move to where the students are growing up now, and why?

Lesson Two

FOCUS: Culture and History

Cultural and historical contexts give rise to the dilemmas and themes at the heart of a novel. Studying these contexts and appreciating the intricate details of the time and place assist us in comprehending the motivations of the characters. In this lesson, use cultural and historical contexts to begin to explore the novel.

The Grapes of Wrath was published in 1939, near the end of a decade that began with the worst economic collapse in American history. In the 1930s, the Great Depression caused widespread unemployment and misery, especially in rural areas, and did not fully run its course until 1941, when the military and its contractors started hiring and drafting for World War II.

In spite—or because—of economic hardship, Hollywood thrived. Bette Davis, Clark Gable, Judy Garland, and the screwball comedies of screenwriters such as Dudley Nichols and Jules Furthman came on the scene. Over the airwaves, Americans listened to the jokes of Jack Benny, the adventures of the Lone Ranger, and the news reports of Edward R. Murrow and Orson Welles' broadcast of *The War of the Worlds.* Welles also created excitement in the fine arts, producing and directing classics on Broadway and Marc Blitzstein's opera "The Cradle Will Rock" for the government's Work Projects Administration. The WPA also funded a renaissance in American art and architecture by commissioning buildings, bridges, and murals across the country. Artists responded by creating both serious works that reflected the growing national crisis, and sophisticated popular entertainment that gave escapism a good name.

Discussion Activities

Have students read Handout Two. Then go to the NEA's Jazz in the Schools Web site at *www.neajazzintheschools.org*. Bear in mind that Steinbeck spent much of his earliest royalties assembling a prodigious jazz collection. At the Web site, ask students to go to Lesson Two and play clips of Duke Ellington, Count Basie, and Benny Goodman. See if they can identify patterns in the music. If possible, team with a music specialist to explore further the music of the 1930s.

Writing Exercise

Ask the students to write a short essay on the ways artists of the 21st century are being influenced by the current political and social climate. In your essay, use specific examples of movies, books, or art. Are writers and filmmakers chronicling current events much as Steinbeck reported the plight of the Dust Bowl migrants? Why or why not?

Homework

Have students read Chapters 6-9 (pp. 40-89) for discussion during the next lesson. Also, have them read pp. 14-15 in the Reader's Guide. Who is telling the story, and what is the value of having alternating voices in the narration?

Lesson Three

FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

The narrator tells the story with a specific perspective informed by his or her beliefs and experiences. This narrator can be a major or minor character in the novel. The narrator weaves her or his point of view, including ignorance and bias, into the telling of the tale. A first-person narrator participates in the events of the novel, using the pronoun "I." A distanced narrator (often not a character) does not participate in the events of the story and uses third person (he, she, they) to narrate the story. This distanced narrator can be omniscient, able to read the minds of all characters within the novel. Ultimately, the type of narrator determines the point of view from which the story is told.

The Grapes of Wrath is narrated in a "limited-omniscient" third-person voice. This narrator recounts the points of view and experiences of many characters, sometimes far removed from the Joad family. The narrator is "limited" because, in spite of this omniscience, the interior lives of the characters—their silent thoughts and perceptions—are not always revealed to the reader.

Discussion Activities

Steinbeck's narration alternates between the specific story of the Joad family and the larger story of all the Dust Bowl migrants. He accomplishes the latter through interchapters that he called "generals." Why would Steinbeck do this? Is the alternation consistent, or are there deviations? How does his focus on the migrants (for example, in Chapter 9) contribute to the point of view of the book?

Writing Exercise

Ask students to choose one character who has appeared so far: Tom, Casy, Ma, Pa, Uncle John, Grampa, Granma. Have students rewrite the novel's beginning from this character's perspective. Have them think about how a story can be told from multiple perspectives. What might Steinbeck be trying to tell us by writing about a whole family and a whole community?

Homework

Have students read Chapters 10-13 (pp. 90-149). Ask students to trace the motivations and development of the same character they chose for the writing exercise. Is the family itself a character in the novel? Have them keep track of each character's way of talking. What particularities do they notice in the phrases, word choices, and education of their chosen character?

Lesson Four

FOCUS: Characters

The main character in a work of literature is called the "protagonist." The protagonist often overcomes a weakness or ignorance to achieve a new understanding by the work's end. A protagonist who acts with great courage may be called a "hero."A protagonist of dubious tenacity and questionable virtue is an "antihero." Readers often debate the virtues and motivations of the protagonists in an attempt to understand whether they are heroic. The protagonist's journey is made more dramatic by challenges presented by characters with different beliefs. A "foil" provokes the protagonist so as to highlight more clearly certain features of the main character. The most important foil, the "antagonist," opposes the protagonist, barring or complicating his or her success.

The novel begins with Tom Joad's release from prison. He is a convicted killer who acted in self-defense and has served his debt to society. Soon he joins his family for the trip to California.

Many readers consider Tom Joad the protagonist of *The Grapes of Wrath*, a man who struggles against violent instincts while standing up for the rights of the dispossessed. Several foils propel Tom into manhood. Reverend Casy speaks a language of pantheism and growing political awareness. Ma is a restraining figure, always reminding Tom of his checkered past and responsibility to the family. Even poor Muley, a solitary outcast on the land, unwittingly warns Tom of the consequences of social exile. These foils vie to lead Tom toward his final choices.

Discussion Activities

Who is the antagonist in *The Grapes of Wrath*? Is it the men who drive the tractors? Is it the bank officials who own the land? Or is the antagonist not a person at all, but the "monster" hounding the farmers from Oklahoma all the way to California? Are the protagonist and the antagonist in this novel in a fair fight? Can the Joads win, or are the odds stacked against them?

Writing Exercise

Steinbeck often alludes to myth to reveal something essential about his characters. Other times, he'll include a story within the novel. For example, he says that the Joads' first-born son, Noah, "was not stupid but he was strange" (p. 78), then Steinbeck tells the story of Noah's birth. Ask students to find another example of this technique, and consider the value of telling stories to develop a character.

Homework

Have students read Chapters 14-17 (pp. 150-200). Ask them to find examples in the text where Steinbeck makes them see the landscape in a new way by comparing it to something else. For instance, challenge them to find moments where inanimate objects are compared to animate ones.

Lesson Five

FOCUS: Figurative Language

Writers often use non-literal language to invite readers to visualize events, view internal conflicts, glimpse social themes, or grasp abstract concepts like beauty, truth, or goodness. An author uses figurative or non-literal language to stretch our imaginations, challenging us to decode the references and meanings bound within images, similes, metaphors, and symbols. Such devices require a reader to participate actively in the novel, as the reader begins to (implicitly or explicitly) interpret non-literal elements of the story.

Discussion Activities

Divide the class into groups. Assign each group a selection of chapters from the novel so far, asking group members to identify figurative language used in those chapters. Students should specifically identify images, similes, and metaphors. In those chapters, how does the figurative language help tell the story? Have each group present its findings to the class, highlighting what it considers the best example. What is implied when a writer treats an inanimate object as if it were alive? Are there counter-examples where Steinbeck treats a creature as if it were a thing?

Writing Exercise

Sometimes Steinbeck uses a mix of sensory images to introduce a metaphor: "The ancient Hudson, with bent and scarred radiator screen, with grease in dusty globules at the worn edges of every moving part, with hub caps gone and caps of red dust in their places—this was the new hearth, the living center of the family" (pp. 99-100). Have students find some imagery in the text and make it into a metaphor, as Steinbeck makes the car into "the new hearth" in the passage above. When is an image merely an image, and when does an author place metaphorical weight on it?

Steinbeck uses metaphor when he writes the following: "66 is the mother road, the road of flight" (p. 118). Have students write two paragraphs about a road trip they have taken, using several examples of figurative language to color their account of the journey. Encourage students to include metaphors as well as similes.

Homework

Have students read Chapters 18-19 (pp. 201-239). Ask them to think about what California represents to the Joads. Challenge them to bring to class three quotes from the text that will help examine the Joads' views of California.

Lesson Six

FOCUS: Symbols

Symbols are interpretive keys to the text. The craft of storytelling depends on symbols that present ideas and point toward new meanings. Most frequently, a specific object will be used to represent (or symbolize) a more abstract concept. The repeated appearance of an object suggests a non-literal or figurative meaning attached to the object above and beyond face value. Symbols are often found in a novel's title, at the beginning and end of the novel, in an important action, or in the name or personality of a character. The life of a novel is perpetuated by generations of readers interpreting and re-interpreting the main symbols of the novel. By decoding symbols, any reader can reveal a new interpretation.

Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise

To summarize, a symbol is an object or action that suggests additional meanings. Use this class period to analyze three major symbols in the novel: the road, the West, and the grapes of wrath.

The Road: Route 66

As America's major east-west road, Highway 66 was also known as "Route 66," "The Mother Road," and "The Main Street of America." A trip from Oklahoma to California was not taken lightly in this pre-interstate era. Focus on the description of the road in Chapter 12: "66 is the path of a people in flight, refugees from dust and shrinking land." How does this tone change by the time we reach Chapter 21? What has changed in the Joad family?

The West

For Americans, the West in general and California in particular have symbolized a new life, or promised land. Building on the homework from Lesson Five, why did so many families in the 1930s—including the fictional Joad family—pin their hope for a better life on California? Pay particular attention to Chapter 18, when the Joad family reaches Tehachapi and sees the vineyards and orchards for the first time.

The Grapes of Wrath

Steinbeck's title quotes from Julia Ward Howe's "Battle-Hymn of the Republic," a famous Civil War anthem associated with the anti-slavery movement. Howe's allusion to "the grapes of wrath" comes from the biblical books of Deuteronomy and Revelation. From what you have read so far, do you think Steinbeck chose a good title? Does it have patriotic, religious, and political connotations? (Students will read the famous passage "In the souls of the people the grapes of wrath are filling and growing heavy" when they reach Chapter 25.)

Homework

Read Chapters 20-21 (pp. 240-284). Students should return to their original Joad character from the homework in previous lessons. How has their character changed? If their character has died, ask them to consider the ways that the death has affected other members of the Joad family.

Lesson Seven

FOCUS: Character Development

Novels trace the development of characters who encounter a series of challenges. Most characters contain a complex balance of virtues and vices. Internal and external forces require characters to question themselves, overcome fears, or reconsider dreams. The protagonist undergoes profound change. A close study of character development maps the evolution of motivation, personality, and belief in each character. Still, the tension between a character's strengths and weaknesses keeps the reader guessing about what might happen next, affecting the drama and the plot.

As the novel unfolds, we see Tom come to the defense of a principle larger than just himself. He learns to protect others against crooks, cons, vigilantes, and violent cops. He uses the toughness he developed in prison to shepherd the Joads to the "safety" of California, stepping in to take on the roles of family members who die, or leave, or lose authority. In this way, Tom grows into the role of family provider.

Discussion Activities

Which members of the Joad family undergo a change in the course of the novel? Divide the class into groups and assign a member of the family to each. Have each group find examples where the character has changed by the time he or she reaches California. What causes this change? Does any character fail to evolve? If so, why? Are the Joads responsible for what happens to them? Have a spokesperson report the group's findings to the class.

Writing Exercise

Have students focus on and write about Tom, Ma, Casy, and Rosasharn, the novel's main characters by the end of the novel. Students should consider these four characters in pairs, since Tom follows Casy's example, while Rosasharn emulates Ma. How are Tom and Casy, or Ma and Rosasharn similar? How are they different?

Homework

Have students read Chapters 22-24 (pp. 285-345). Ask them to begin thinking about how Steinbeck has organized the events that make up the plot, and whether the story so far points to a likely resolution. Students should come to class with what they think are the two most important turning points so far in the novel.

Lesson Eight

FOCUS: The Plot Unfolds

The author artfully builds a plot structure to create expectations, increase suspense, and inform character development. The timing of events, from beginning, to middle, to end, can make a novel predictable or riveting. A plot, propelled by a crisis, will reach a climax and close with a resolution (sometimes called denouement). Foreshadowing and flashbacks allow the author to defy time while telling the story. A successful author will keep a reader entranced by clever pacing built into the story, sometimes confounding a simple plot by telling stories within stories.

There are many moments in the novel that can be seen as turning points: the bank's eviction of the tenant farmers, the deaths of Grampa and Granma, Noah's and Connie's desertions, the revival of hope when the Joads arrive at the government camp, and the scuffle with the deputies.

Discussion Activities

Use the homework assignment from the last lesson to have students present the most important turning points in the novel. Ask them to refer to key passages from the novel, explaining why this moment is significant. What consequences does this turning point have for our main characters—Tom, Ma, or Casy?

Have students read "The Novel at the Movies" on pages 12-13 in the Reader's Guide. Then have them imagine they are making a movie of the novel. Tell them they have to cut certain scenes from the novel because of limited running time. Divide the class into groups and have each suggest two scenes that could be dropped. How does cutting the scene change the structure? Does it improve the story? Have students explain the reasons for their choices.

Writing Exercise

Ask students to anticipate the novel's ending. Have them write several paragraphs describing what could become of the Joad family if they stay in the government camp. Ask them to consider whether the Joads at this point seem likelier to be doomed or saved.

Homework

Have students read Chapters 25-26 (pp. 346-405). Will the novel end on a tragic or comic note? Can they predict any particular tragedy or triumph for a main character?

Lesson Nine

FOCUS: Themes of the Novel

Profound questions raised by the story allow characters (and the reader) to explore the meaning of human life, and extract themes. Themes investigate topics explored for centuries by philosophers, politicians, scientists, historians, and theologians. Classic themes include intellectual freedom versus censorship, personal moral code in relation to political justice, and spiritual faith versus rational commitments. A novel can shed light on these age-old debates by creating new situations to challenge and explore human nature.

Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise

Use the following questions to stimulate discussion or provide writing exercises. Using historical references to support ideas, explore the statements *The Grapes of Wrath* makes about the following themes:

The Individual Against the Corporation: "It happens that every man in a bank hates what the bank does, and yet the bank does it. The bank is something more than men, I tell you" (p. 33).

1. Who—or what —is most responsible for the plight of the Joads? Bankers? Tractor drivers? Landowners? Or nature itself? Have students explain their answers in detail.
2. What actions does Steinbeck advocate to fix the Joads' dilemma?

The American Dream: Grampa says: "Gonna get me a whole big bunch of grapes off a bush, or whatever, an' I'm gonna squash 'em on my face an' let 'em run offen my chin" (p. 83).

1. What happens to Grampa's dream? Does anyone in the family find it?
2. What are "the grapes of wrath" in Steinbeck's novel?

Redemption: "...The on'y thing you got to look at is that ever' time they's a little step fo'ward, she may slip back a little, but she never slips clear back...an' that means they wasn't no waste even if it seemed like they was" (p. 384).

1. Are Casy's words borne out by the novel, or are they meant to be sad and ironic?
2. How do the struggles of each of the Joads change them as individuals?

Homework

Have students finish reading the novel. Ask them to begin their essays, using the "Essay Topics" at the end of this guide. Outlines are due at the next class.

Lesson Ten

FOCUS: What Makes a Great Book?

Novels illustrate the connections between individuals and questions of humanity. Great stories explore the mysteries of our daily lives, while placing those conflicts in the larger picture of human struggle. Readers connect with the story as the writer's style communicates the plot, characters, and themes. By creating opportunities for imagination, and reflection, a great novel affects many generations of readers, changing lives, challenging assumptions, and forever breaking new ground.

Discussion Activities

Ask students to make a list of the characteristics of a great book. Write these on the board. What elevates a novel to greatness? Then ask them to discuss, in groups, other books that include some of the same characteristics. Do any of these books remind them of *The Grapes of Wrath*? How so? How not?

A great writer can be the voice of a generation. What kind of voice does Steinbeck create through the Joads? What kind of voice is in the interchapters? Does the novel speak for more than one man, and more than one family? What does this voice tell us about the concerns and dreams of the generation that experienced the Great Depression?

Divide students into groups and have each decide on the single most important theme of the novel. Have a spokesperson from each group explain the group's decision. Write these themes on the board. Do all the groups agree?

Writing Exercise

Write a letter to a friend, perhaps one who does not like to read, and explain why *The Grapes of Wrath* is worth reading. Make an argument for why the novel still has meaning, even if the Depression is now a distant memory.

Have students work on their essays in class. Be available to assist with outlines, drafts, and arguments. Have each student pair up with another to edit outlines and/or rough drafts. Provide students with the characteristics of a well-written essay.

Homework

For next class, finish essays and present arguments to the class. Celebrate by participating in a Big Read community event.

Essay Topics

The discussion activities and writing exercises in this guide provide you with possible essay topics, as do the "Discussion Questions" in the Reader's Guide (pp. 16-17). Advanced students can come up with their own essay topics, as long as they are interesting and specific. Other ideas for essays are provided here.

For essays, students should organize their ideas around a stated thesis, argument, or idea about the novel. This statement should be focused, with clear reasons supporting its conclusion. The thesis and supporting reasons should rely on references to the text.

1. Steinbeck writes in Chapter 3 about nothing more than a turtle crossing a highway—a turtle that later reappears in the novel. Why does Steinbeck devote such an elaborate account to such a mundane event? What does the turtle represent, or foreshadow?

2. Steinbeck says of the age of commercial farming, "Men ate what they had not raised, had no connection with the bread. The land bore under iron, and under iron gradually died" (p. 36). Imagine the land as a character in *The Grapes of Wrath*. What does it look like? What is its past? How does it change during the novel? Is it still alive by the end?

3. Tom Joad learns how to write in prison. But "ever' time Pa seen writin'," he tells Muley, "somebody took somepin' away from 'im" (p. 54). What role does writing and education play in Steinbeck's novel? Is it ever used on behalf of the Joads? How is it used against them? What would the Joads have thought of *The Grapes of Wrath*?

4. The Joads and their fellow travelers are forced to buy and sell everything within reach: cars, plows, a loaf of bread, a cup of water, a place to camp. As Steinbeck writes, "Merchandising was a secret to them" (p. 97). What does Steinbeck say about the world of business? Do the Joads ever come out on the better side of a bargain? Is there any such thing as a fair deal in the novel?

5. Ma tells Tom, "We're the people—we go on...a different time's comin'" (p. 280). Is Ma right? For the migrant workers of America, did a different time ever come? Is the Joad experience still a part of the American landscape? How can we tell?

6. Violence, either real or threatened, is a part of everyday life for the Joads. Are they violent among themselves? Is their violence premeditated? Does it achieve its goal? Find examples of where their violence is justified or unjustified.

7. "Woman can change better'n a man," Ma tells Pa. "Woman got all her life in her arms. Man got it all in his head" (p. 423). Who adapts better during the journey to California, the Joad women or the Joad men? How do their responses to success and disaster differ? Are there times when men and women use their best talents in collaboration?

Capstone Projects

Teachers may consider the ways in which these activities may be linked to other Big Read community events. Most of these projects could be shared at a local library, a student assembly, or a bookstore.

1. Photo Gallery: Ask students to find Depression-era photographs of rural farm workers, as in the work of Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange. Ask them also to look for photos of contemporary migrant workers in the U.S. from recent periodicals. They should try to find pairs of photos that echo or contrast with each other in subject or spirit. They should be able to discuss the photographs they bring, and point to details that explain why they chose them. Have students exhibit this "gallery" at a local library.

2. Explore the historical period of the 1930s by creating posters that provide in-depth information on what was happening in the following artistic disciplines: music and jazz, theater, painting and sculpture, photography, and dance. Display these posters in classrooms around the school.

3. Ask students to produce a scene in which they put Tom Joad on trial for murdering a man with a pick handle. They should write the dialogue and perform the parts of the characters who testify. The scene can be produced at a student assembly and include a discussion afterward.

4. Have students write a newspaper article describing the eventual fates of any of the Joads alive at the novel's end: Tom, Noah, Connie, Al, Ma, Pa, Rosasharn. Students should use their imaginations, but base their stories on what they know about their subject from the novel. Have students display their articles at a local library or bookstore.

5. Ask students to imagine they are government officials reporting on the conditions of California migrant workers during the Depression. Have them write a report on what they find among the workers at one of the stops along the Joads' journey: Sallisaw, Santa Rosa, Needles, Bakersfield, Weedpatch, or the cotton camp. Ask them to explain the causes of the situation in their report and offer practical solutions.

6. Host a screening of Nunnally Johnson and John Ford's movie version of *The Grapes of Wrath* at a local theater. Invite a scholar to come to the screening and lead a discussion afterward about the adaptation of the novel.

The Dust Bowl

The Dust Bowl catastrophe began with a plow and a dream. The escalating price of wheat during World War I encouraged the cultivation of large areas of the Great Plains previously used only for grazing. Through the 1920s, farmers confident in the bounty of the American heartland plowed under an area of 100 million acres, including parts of Kansas, Colorado, Oklahoma, Texas, and New Mexico.

Farmers plowed the marginal land and reaped good harvests for years. But when cattle and sheep were returned to the land in the late '20s, they overgrazed soil that had already been loosened by cultivation. The native grasses that retained water were plowed under or eaten and rubbed away by livestock. A serious mistake in land management, the planting and overgrazing of the Plains needed only a small push to become a full-fledged disaster.

That push came in 1931 when the rains stopped. Within three years, the central Plains region became a vast desert. High winds blew loose Plains soil as far as the East coast, darkening closer cities under "black blizzards." On a dry, windy day the sun could hardly be seen, and the dirt collected in drifts. In 1935 the area was dubbed a "dust bowl" by the Associated Press, a grim name that never went away. It became the worst drought in American history.

By mid-decade, the federal government was working to restore the land. Through progressive practices like contour plowing, crop rotation, shelter belts, and strip plowing, agriculturalists strengthened the Great Plains against human abuse and unfriendly weather. By the early 1940s, the area was already recovering.

The legacy of the Dust Bowl was harsh. About a quarter of the area's population, perhaps as many as two million people, left the land. Some 200,000 ended up in California, where they accepted the ill-paid stoop labor of migrant workers. It was the most concentrated migration in United States history. When Woody Guthrie sang, "I'm a-goin' where them dust storms never blow, blow, blow,/An' I ain't a-gonna be treated this way," ("Blowin Down This Road"), he sang for a heartland population that had become refugees in their own country.

During the Dust Bowl years, what early explorers had dubbed "the Great American Desert"—the North American interior—lived up to its name. The Dust Bowl was not simply the result of prolonged drought but the consequence of humans and nature unwittingly working in concert toward a disastrous end.

The WPA

The Work Projects Administration (WPA), originally called the Works Progress Administration, was the largest government agency established to fight unemployment during the Great Depression. From its inception in 1935 as part of President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, the agency was responsible for refurbishing America's road infrastructure, erecting buildings and bridges, improving airports, developing the arts, and giving millions of its employees an honest wage and a job in the broken American economy.

By 1935, America had some twenty million people on government relief. The WPA paid heads of families on relief for a thirty-hour work week. The agency employed both blue- and white-collar workers, who did everything from building zoos and writing books to laying sewers, landscaping parks, and paving airport runways.

The WPA is well remembered for its contribution to American arts and letters. One program was the Federal Writers' Project, an ambitious venture that produced, among other things, a series of comprehensive state and regional guidebooks. The American Guide Series offered cultural essays, automobile tours, historical reflections, photographs, and more. The Writers' Project also produced extensive folklore research, including interviews with many former slaves recorded in the Slave Narrative Collection.

The WPA's reach in the arts extended far beyond the written word. Through the Federal Art Project (FAP), unemployed American artists were hired to decorate and create murals for public buildings such as schools, libraries, and post offices. They created some 200,000 works of art during the FAP's tenure. Among the artists who worked for WPA were Thomas Hart Benton, Ben Shahn, Willem de Kooning, and Jacob Lawrence.

WPA photographers also captured the visual saga of America in the Great Depression. They depicted urban and rural life of the 1930s and extensively documented programs including the Federal Theatre Project, another artistic arm of the WPA. Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans took the best-known photos of the Depression, those showing poverty in rural America, under the direction of the Farm Security Administration, a sister relief agency created under the New Deal.

The WPA employed over eight million people during its existence, including writers Saul Bellow, John Cheever, Studs Terkel, Richard Wright, and Zora Neale Hurston. By the time the agency disbanded in 1943, it had bequeathed a legacy, both economic and artistic, that would benefit generations of Americans with its documentary precision, its enormous scale, and its human touch.

Migrant Farm Workers

Land in America is plentiful, but not always cheap. Those who cannot afford to buy it often work it for a wage. Tenant farmers cultivate a plot of land and pay a portion of the harvest to the owner, as do the Joads before the beginning of *The Grapes of Wrath*. But migrant farmers and laborers occupy a rung further down the ladder, traveling seasonally and getting paid by the bushel to do painful and dehumanizing "stoop labor."

Since subsistence farming began to wane during the late 19th century, cheap migrant labor in America has been in constant demand. The people taking migrant jobs have belonged to many different groups: whites like the Joads, African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinos. The Depression-era photographs of Dorothea Lange, Horace Bristol, Walker Evans, and others made the grim faces of migrant farmers a permanent part of the collective American memory.

During the Depression, American citizens desperate for work did most of the migrant labor. Due to the labor shortage caused by World War II, however, the Bracero Program brought five million Mexican agricultural workers to the United States, beginning in 1942. The program ended two decades later, when a rash of accusations and lawsuits regarding human rights abuses were filed against the American and Mexican governments.

In the 1960s, the United Farm Workers brought to light the conditions of migrant laborers. Led by Arizona-born César Chávez, the union organized protests, marches, and boycotts to educate the American public about who was picking their produce and the conditions in which they lived. In the 1970s, an estimated seventeen million Americans participated in a successful boycott of non-union grapes.

In more recent years, right-to-work legislation and a surplus of labor have prevented most migrant farmers from unionizing. Though estimates vary, it is safe to say that more than two million migrant farm workers labor in America's fields—most of them Spanish-speaking and at least 100,000 of them children. About a third of the total are U.S. citizens who live a hand-to-mouth existence. Their average education stops at the sixth grade, their lifespan ranks substantially below the American norm, and the majority of them have incomes well below the poverty line.

Many farmworkers today labor under conditions familiar to the writers and photographers who chronicled their precursors during the Depression. Migrant farmers remain a large yet nearly invisible presence in the American mosaic.

Teaching Resources

Books

Benson, Jackson J. *The True Adventures of John Steinbeck, Writer.* New York: Viking Press, 1984.

Bloom, Harold, ed. *Modern Critical Interpretations of The Grapes of Wrath.* New York: Chelsea House, 1988.

Burkhead, Cynthia. *Student Companion to John Steinbeck.* Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002.

Ditsky, John, ed. *Critical Essays on Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath.* Boston: G.K. Hall, 1989.

French, Warren, ed. *A Companion to The Grapes of Wrath.* New York: The Viking Press, 1963.

Johnson, Claudia Durst, ed. *Understanding The Grapes of Wrath: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historical Documents.* Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999.

Lange, Dorothea, and Paul S. Taylor. *An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion.* New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1939.

Parini, Jay. *John Steinbeck: A Biography.* New York: Henry Holt, 1995.

Shillinglaw, Susan, ed. *John Steinbeck: Centennial Reflections by American Writers.* San Jose: Center for Steinbeck Studies, 2002.

Steinbeck, Elaine and Robert Wallsten, eds. *Steinbeck: A Life in Letters.* New York: Viking, 1975.

Worster, Donald. *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1979.

Web sites

http://steinbeck.sjsu.edu/fellows/

The Martha Heasley Cox Center for Steinbeck Studies, San Jose State University. A site with wide-ranging biographical, photographic, and critical information on Steinbeck.

www.steinbeck.org

The National Steinbeck Center. Maintained in Steinbeck's hometown of Salinas, the Center's Web site offers a rich array of resources, ranging from biographical information and an archival index to Web links and ideas for school field trips.

www.calhum.org/programs/grapes_intro.htm

California Council for the Humanities. A useful site for teachers and facilitators of all types, it includes information on companion books, related films, community activities, and book clubs.

National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Standards*

1. Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.
2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).
4. Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.
5. Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.
6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.
7. Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.
8. Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.
9. Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles.
10. Students whose first language is not English make use of their first language to develop competency in the English language arts and to develop understanding of content across the curriculum.
11. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.
12. Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

* This guide was developed with NCTE Standards and State Language Arts Standards in mind. Use these standards to guide and develop your application of the curriculum.

**"Literature is as old as speech.
It grew out of human need for it,
and it has not changed except to
become more needed."**

—JOHN STEINBECK
from his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, 1962

"On the highways the people moved like ants and searched for work, for food. And the anger began to ferment."

—JOHN STEINBECK
from *The Grapes of Wrath*

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS

THE BIG READ

INSTITUTE of Museum and Library SERVICES

The Big Read is an initiative of the National Endowment for the Arts designed to restore reading to the center of American culture. The NEA presents The Big Read in partnership with the Institute of Museum and Library Services and in cooperation with Arts Midwest. The Big Read brings together partners across the country to encourage reading for pleasure and enlightenment.

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